Samaritan is not Synonymous with Charity

The parable of the "Good Samaritan" is not a title that has aged well. We know the story well enough, a man is robbed and beaten, ignored by his own people, and only a Samaritan who passes by takes care of him. Now, Samaritan funds and Samaritan charities have become common, a callback to the story we all know.

Except, it's a terrible name, and it has lost the meaning and context of the original telling.

Jesus tells the parable in response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" posed by "an expert of the law," according to Luke's telling. Probably a test, definitely a cynical question.

So in Jesus' story, a priest and a Levite pass by the broken man. If he was dead, or to die, they would be made unclean by physical contact with him. The process of cleansing was long and tedious, including completely shaving oneself and washing in the water that was poured over a burned animal sacrifice (like *Fight Club*'s history of soap). So they weren't being uncharitable you see, they were being practical.

The Samaritan treats him different. But who was the Samaritan? The Samaritans were a people despised by the tribe of Judah (the Jews) for they were a people of mixed blood. They were the descendants of the Northern tribes of Israel taken by the Assyrians, intermarried and mixed with Gentile lineage. Not like the Jews, who had remained "pure" in their heritage.

Notice Jesus didn't tell the parable of the "Good Roman" – Romans were oppressing the Jews, occupying their land, treating the Jews as a conquered people. That would have been a shock, too. A Roman, especially a Roman soldier or a Roman officer, to have taken pity on the Jewish man, would have been a shock. But Jesus did not use an example of someone who the Jews saw as over them and hated, but someone they saw as beneath them and hated.

Even knowing the context of Samaritans in the time of Jesus doesn't fully deliver the impact this must have had. Jesus chose to hold up as an example someone that was derided by his audience as an example of someone who acted neighborly. It was a rebuke wrapped in an example, as bitingly cynical (if I might suggest Jesus was cynical in this matter) as the jaded question that prompted the story.

But other than calling back to the story, why use the term "Good Samaritan" or "Samaritan" for our charities? The label seems to have lost its meaning over time. Note that Jesus doesn't even use the term "Good Samaritan," that's the title we use to label the story. It's rather patronizing – "You know all Samaritan are scum, but hey, remember that story about the *good* one? That was remarkable, and worth retelling."

If I may be permitted to think about what Jesus might have used for an example today, based on the Jewish-Samaritan relations of His time, maybe he would have told the story of the Good Liberal, or the Good Guy in a MAGA hat. Maybe it would have been The Good Drug Addict. The Good Illegal Alien. The Good Homeless Person. The Good Person-With-Different-Skin-Color-Than-You.

I think He would have chosen someone His current audience would have seen as below them, someone His audience derided, not someone they thought was a threat. Someone they found unworthy of pity or charity. Someone that His audience could not imagine making a selfless act and sacrifice, who overcame his tribal feeling of injustice and cared for a fellow human being from a class that oppressed, excluded, and judged his kin and those like him.

Maybe, just maybe, Jesus today would tell the parable of The Good Christian.

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